

The Figure in the Painting

There are no figures anywhere in Dexter Dalwood's paintings. Well, almost. One fragmentary exception is the two legs that dangle from the top edge of the canvas in *Under Blackfriars*. The water of the Thames that runs beneath them is turned fiery red by the sun reflected in its rippled surface, as if Monet's study of the Houses of Parliament or André Derain's Fauvist view of busy commercial traffic in the Pool of London had jumped a century into the present day. In the rise and fall of the tide we can see the shadowy presence of politics and the establishment, and the usurping of the capital's erstwhile trade in goods and raw materials by contemporary casino finance. To either side of the legs are large black pillars which, we infer, support the bridge from which the body hangs. The limbs belong to Roberto Calvi, the man nicknamed 'God's banker', whose body was found hanging under Blackfriars Bridge in 1982. Initially presumed to have committed suicide it has subsequently appeared more likely that he was murdered. The bank he headed collapsed with massive debts days after his death, and the story surrounding these events has encompassed laundering of drug money, mafia connections, a dubious Masonic lodge and the Vatican. *Under Blackfriars* was painted in 2008, and Calvi's story of financial corruption resonates with the global banking crisis of that year as well as with the tired exasperation with those who run our lives that quickly followed. This is history painting. For Dalwood, the problems of engaging with the events of the world, be that the Arab Spring, war in Afghanistan and the Gulf, economic meltdown, environmental devastation, or the politics of neoliberalism, are always also and primarily problems of painting.

Many people are invoked in Dalwood's titles – poets and writers, politicians, businessmen, musicians, and other public figures – but none of them make an appearance in the paintings themselves. Rather than giving us their likeness, Dalwood's compositions present a structured context, an interior or exterior environment whose various elements offer a space within which these people, their actions and the ideas and events associated with and surrounding them can breathe. In many ways, too, the non-appearance of the eponymous character is an important withholding of certainty, since the person named in the title is usually only one among several characters we

might consider to be involved in the drama of the work. Mao is not in Mao Tse Tung's Study, although the well-known portrait of him does hang on the wall. But does that perhaps mean that Andy Warhol rather than Mao is really there? After all, it is Mao Tse Tung's study, not Mao Zedong's, so we are placed historically several decades ago, before the pinyin transliteration system became normalised in the West during the 1980s - back, indeed, to the time when both Mao and Warhol were alive. And the study wall is painted in the kind of broad, even black stripes familiar to us from Frank Stella's works of the late 1950s. Nixon, politically compromised at home, on a visit to China, Communism versus capitalism, pop versus abstraction, or the furthering of the cold war by cultural means - what arguments open up to us in this painting? Likewise, the mirror in Truman Capote has a reflection indicated with Roy Lichtenstein's trademark Ben Day dots, and in Hendrix's Last Basement, the room in which he died choking on his vomit in 1970 has a carpet derived from Morris Louis's Floral of 1960. The whole decade of the space race, youth protest, flower power, psychedelia and the curdling of all those ideals reverberates in the clashing patterns of bedspread, wallpaper and colourfully stained floor.

Robert Walser, the painting that provides something of a key to this current exhibition, is monochrome, restricted to black, white and intermediate shades of grey. Most of the canvas is taken up with a village scene. A road, entering along the bottom edge of the canvas from the right sweeps round and moves centrally into the space of the picture, leading to a cluster of houses. There are strong echoes of Cézanne both in the image itself, and in the brushstrokes with which it is rendered. Even if you cannot place the exact work, the slender trunks of foreground trees that provide both frame and screen through which to see the characteristically grouped houses, the prominent white gable of the central house reminiscent of the outline of Mont Ste Victoire, and the paint marks that both build form and signal the reluctance of the eye to affirm precisely what it sees are all suggestive of Cézanne. Running across the top of this scene and occupying the upper portion of the canvas is a frieze that has clearly been derived from a print of a mountainous landscape set against a sky filled with flowing and billowing clouds. Dalwood describes Robert Walser as a 'one-cut collage', and insofar as its composition places just two things - a Cézanne painting and a mountainscape - next to one another,

this is true. But of course it is also more complex than that. The frieze image, which is a detail taken from the frontispiece of an old edition of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, is repeated three times, so there are really four images, not two. And then there is the painting's title, Robert Walser. Taking in the various greys and smudged whites of the painting, one thinks of the pencil Walser used to write his minuscule script; looking down the lane as it curves towards the village before curving again to skirt the houses, one is reminded of the wanderings of Walser's own life and of his short novel, *The Walk*; and in the brushstrokes that bring out the visual hesitancy referred to by Maurice Merleau-Ponty as Cézanne's doubt, we see what Walter Benjamin described as the 'uncertain light' which surrounds the figures in Walser's short stories.¹

An essential element in Dalwood's paintings, then, is the widespread reference he makes to the works and techniques of other painters. These references contribute to the collaged compositions that form the first stage in the production of each new painting. Echoing Sol LeWitt's view of the generative importance of ideas, Dalwood refers to these collages as being the engines to make the paintings. In view of his biography - a painter embarking on a career in the 1980s - we might assume him to have affinity with the painterly postmodernism of that period. To name only a few we could mention Julian Schnabel's Sigmar Polke-inspired appropriation of images, David Salle drawing on multiple sources, Jonathan Lasker juxtaposing varieties of abstract style, and Ross Bleckner's desperate attempts to breathe life into the husk of a moribund modernism as represented by Op Art. In that context, reference to the work of other artists was talked of in terms of parody and pastiche, the grand socio-political narratives were said to be defeated, and a sense of historical connectedness thought of as all but impossible. To see Dalwood's work exclusively in this light, however, would be a mistake. Balancing the ostensible licence to play with historical propriety that postmodernism enjoyed is a strong reckoning with what persists as a sense of history. What we repeatedly witness in his paintings is a connection made with past work such that it is released into a renewed currency of the moment. It is what Benjamin calls the shock of rejuvenation that occurs when 'what has been is reflected in the dewy fresh 'instant'.² The meditation on the socio-political realities of present day America, *Washington Crossing the Delaware*, incorporates an untitled painting by Willem de Kooning from 1950. In the same year, de

Kooning gave a lecture, *The Renaissance and Order*, in which he spoke of the history of art as a 'train track that goes way back to Mesopotamia'.³ How does Dalwood's recourse to collage, a mixing of elements he takes pleasure in calling perverse, connect us to this track? In his book, *The Non-Objective World*, Kasimir Malevich wrote of the relationship between the dynamism of his Suprematist compositions and the new technologies of speed and flight. These phenomena are so intimately interconnected that it would, he assures us, be entirely appropriate to refer to Suprematism as 'aeronautical'.⁴ A handful of years before Malevich showed *Black Square*, his first Suprematist composition, Picasso had already announced in his *Scallop Shell* that *Notre Avenir est dans l'Air*. Proust's Marcel, too, bursts into tears at his first sighting of an aeroplane and is captivated as the pilot points the nose of his machine straight up into the sky, 'seeming to yield to some attraction that was the reverse of gravity'. Is it really only coincidence that the world and its art took off at more or less the same moment that it also started to stick down? *Décollage* and collage, it seems, form two sides of the same high modernist coin. Dalwood's paintings begin in sticking down, and we can recognise in this mode of practice a strong sense of the importance that painting's modernist history has for him in his efforts to come to terms with modernity's broader dynamics.

There is a dialogue of making a painting, says Dalwood. If so, with whom and with what is this dialogue being conducted? In Ezra Pound we see the bow of the gondola that ferried the poet's flower-draped coffin to its burial site in Venice. This happened in 1972, the year before the release of *Don't Look Now*, Nic Roeg's adaptation of the *Daphne du Maurier* story that also featured a Venetian funeral. The lagoon on which Pound's craft glides is an expanse of green wavy lines. Like the mountain scene in Robert Walser, these lines are a smaller pattern that has been repeat printed to cover the entire surface of the canvas. A miniature version of the gondola also appears multiple times within these repetitions. There are echoes of the grid, the interlocking planes of Cubism, Mondrian's extending lines (both on de Kooning's train track), and Jasper Johns's number fields. Appropriately enough, then, we are in a space that makes marked acknowledgement of modernism with one of its greatest champions. with the poet who wrote, in his *Guide to Kulchur*, that 'the history of a culture is the history of ideas going into action'.⁵ The gondola enters from the left hand edge of the canvas and heads

towards a multi-coloured, patterned area on the right. This is a detail from David Bomberg's Ju-Jitsu, one of the visually fractured compositions he made in the years prior to the First World War while he was associated with the Vorticists. Just as Bomberg's attachment to the machine aesthetic would not survive the First World War, so the words of Pound's Salutation the Third from his Blast poems resound now as an indictment of current predicaments:

Come, let us on with the new deal,
Let us be done with pandars and jobbery,
Let us spit upon those who pat the big bellies for
profit,
Let us go out in the air a bit.⁶

In his study of the Cantos, Ideas Into Action, Clark Emery writes of how Pound involves his readers in history not as spectators of accomplished facts, but as people in possession of necessarily fragmentary information who participate in events with all the confusion, misunderstanding and error we might expect.⁷ Dalwood's painting shows us the fresh force of such an approach.

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· The title refers to the short story by the American novelist Henry James, *The Figure in the Carpet* (1896). This not only considers the relationship between life, art and criticism but also reflects James' preoccupation with art and politics as the related but distinct routes to acting in and comprehending the world.

¹ Walter Benjamin, 'Franz Kafka: On the tenth anniversary of his death', *Selected Writings*, vol 2, Belknap/Harvard, Cambridge, Mass, 1999, p 798

² Benjamin, 'On the Image of Proust', *Selected Writings*, vol 2, p 244

³ Willem de Kooning, The Renaissance and Order, lecture given at Studio 35, New York, 1950. Originally published in *trans/formation*, vol 1 no 2, New York, 1951. Reprinted in Herschel B Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, University of California Press, 1968, p 555

⁴ Kasimir Malevich, 'Introduction to the Theory of the Additional Element in Painting', *The Non-Objective World*, trans Howard Dearstyne, Theobald, Chicago, 1959, p 61. Reprinted Chipp, p 338

⁵ Ezra Pound, *Guide to Kulchur*, Faber and Faber, London, 1938, p 44

⁶ Pound, Salutation the Third, *Collected Shorter Poems*, Faber and Faber, London, 1984, p145

⁷ See William Cookson, *A Guide to the Cantos of Ezra Pound*, Anvil, London, 2001, p 21